DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 482 438 SO 035 202

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TITLE	Social Studies Teachers, Experiential Learning, Standards-Based Curriculum and Assessment.
PUB DATE	2003-00-00
NOTE	20p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Computer Software Selection; Educational Research; *Educational Resources; *Experiential Learning; High Schools; Internet; Secondary Education; *Social Studies; *Student Evaluation; Teacher Surveys
IDENTIFIERS	Administrator Surveys; *Social Studies Teachers

ABSTRACT

A study focused on identifying what resources social studies teachers (n=120) were using in their classrooms for the benefit of their students as well as identifying experiential learning resources on the Internet, in software programs, and in central Virginia. Studies were reviewed to determine the effects of experiential learning on students. The studies indicated experiential learning does benefit students in ways traditional teaching methods may not. A teacher survey was distributed to high school social studies teachers in three counties in Virginia to identify what resources teachers were using for experiential learning and whether or not they were using them. A second survey was given to administrators at six sites. Results indicated reasons teachers were not using the resources. All respondents listed high-stakes standardized assessments as primary reasons. Findings also suggest that interest in and understanding of the value of experiential learning are other reasons teachers did not use the resources. Suggestions are offered to promote experiential learning within the standards-based teaching environment. Includes two figures. Contains 13 references. (Author/BT)

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ED 482 438

TEACHING, EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING, STANDARDIZED ASSESSMENTS

Social Studies Teachers,
Experiential Learning, Standards-Based Curriculum
and Assessment

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Abstract

The current study focused on identifying what resources social studies teachers were using in their classrooms for the benefit of their students as well as identifying experiential learning resources on the Internet, in software programs, and in Central Virginia. Numerous studies were consulted to determine the effects of experiential learning on students. These studies indicated experiential learning does benefit students in ways traditional teaching methods may not. A teacher survey was distributed to high school social studies teachers in three counties in Virginia to determine what resources teachers were using for experiential learning, if they were not using them, why, etc. The results indicated that there are ample resources available for use in a standards-based curriculum, however, teachers petitioned in this study were not using them in their classrooms. The results also indicated reasons teachers were not using these, with all respondents listing high-stakes standardized assessments as primary reasons. Suggestions were offered to promote experiential learning within the standards-based teaching environment.

Social Studies Teachers, Experiential Learning, Standards-Based Curriculum and Assessment

Rationale for Study

The Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL's) have been adopted as a way to measure the success of students and faculty alike in the hopes of working towards a stronger educational system. In Virginia, all public school students are expected to pass the Language Arts, Science, Mathematics, and Social Studies SOL's. The tests are administered at all levels of education; however, this study focused on test scores reported from eighth grade and all high school Social Studies SOL tests. In a review of published scores and statistics from 1998 to 2000, Social Studies scores were generally much lower than the other three areas of testing (language arts, math, science).

The SOL's have been viewed as being too fact-oriented, rather than emphasizing common themes in history and chronological sequences of historical events. Another criticism has been the SOL's lack of adequate coverage in certain areas, such as the Civil War (Wermers, 2001). An additional criticism has been the design of the Social Studies SOL assessments.

In this study, another possible explanation for the low Social Studies SOL was examined. Certain studies conducted by national education offices suggest that experiential learning, active learning, and related resources enhance students' performance (Snowman, 2000). The present study examined if samples of Virginia

social studies teachers were using teaching methods such as experiential learning and if so how they impacted student performance.

Introduction

In the secondary education setting, much of the material learned is either being introduced for the first time or being studied in depth for the first time. For example, though students are introduced to World History in middle school, subjects such as the holocaust and the slave trade are not introduced on a major scale until they enter the secondary education setting. Since history does not change, this first impression will stay with these students as they continue their education. Through the use of experiential learning processes this initial exposure to history can be a positive experience as well as beneficial to students' learning (Jacobs, 1999). Experiential learning is any form of education that emphasizes personal experience of the learner rather than learning from lectures, books, and other second hand sources (NSEE.ORG, 1997).

However, for experiential learning to be most effective students must first be introduced to basic relevant principles in a well-organized manner using more traditional practices such as lecture. After introduction to the materials, teachers can then involve students in experiential learning activities. These activities can engage a broad range of learning styles and learning modalities and increase understanding and information recall (Donahue, 1999). For example, visiting the exhibit "The Story of Virginia: An American Experience" at the Virginia Historical Society and seeing a newly discovered Powhatan Indian canoe, a reconstructed plantation building, or hearing the stories of slaves and civil war soldiers. Howard Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences would suggest such a site visit could engage students who may learn better through their spatial, bodily-

kinesthetic, and interpersonal/intrapersonal intelligences. Thus, benefiting those students that may not learn best in traditional classroom setting. Sally Berman (1997) has completed a study that indicates students with strengths in each of Gardner's identified multiple intelligences benefit from experiential learning. The experiential learning programs in her study included topic-related field trips and other activities.

Through the incorporation of experiential learning, all students have greater opportunities for recall of the information than if just exposed to a teacher lecture on the same topics (Jacobs). Contact with historical stimuli better enables students to recall the information they have learned because "Experiential education is a process through which a learner constructs knowledge, skill, and value from direct experiences and from opportunities in order to process, generalize, and apply learning" (Jacobs). In terms of the standardized tests, this could mean higher scores and a greater success rate on assessments.

Constructivism.

Constructivism is the theoretical basis of experiential learning. Constructivism states learners construct their own understanding of material, new learning depends on current understanding of the material, learning is facilitated by social interaction, and meaningful learning occurs within authentic learning tasks (Dewey, 1910). By understanding the tenets of constructivism one can begin to develop an understanding of why experiential learning is effective for students.

The first characteristic states, "They [students] interpret stimuli on the basis of what they already know..." (Brophy, 1992). The implications of this for experiential learning show educators that students must use previously constructed knowledge to fully

understand new concepts in the field. The second characteristic of constructivism emphasizes, "that new learning is interpreted in the immediate context of current understanding" (Eggen and Kauchak, 2001). For students studying in the field, or on the Internet, this means that experiential learning activities are most beneficial when the learners have been introduced to basic concepts using more traditional classroom instruction. If this knowledge has not been introduced, students will have to rely on "isolated information," which is more difficult for them to process and understand (Eggen and Kauchak).

The educational benefit of social interaction for learning is the third characteristic. "Learning communities encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning through cooperative ventures" (Eggen and Kauchak). As illustrated by Crew's (1977) study, experiential learning enhances students' relationships with others and their abilities for social decision-making. The fourth and final characteristic of constructivism states authentic tasks are activities that require an understanding of the materials' use in the world outside the classroom. These provide students with necessary skills in areas such as realistic thinking and decision-making (Eggen and Kauchak). Using active learning to attain a real-world understanding of the material is one of the key aspects of experiential learning. These four tenets of constructivism ground the belief that students will benefit in a social context as well as an academic context from experiential learning activities.

Experiential Learning.

Experiential learning is any form of education that emphasizes personal experience of the learner rather than learning from lectures, books, and other second hand sources (NSEE.ORG). The National Society for Experiential Education (2000) lists such

examples as field studies and active learning projects (software, virtual field trips, guest speakers, class role playing and outside research, etc.) as possible methods for implementation of Experiential Learning in the classroom. "Quality education requires the kinds of learning involved in both experiential education and information assimilation" (Duley, 1978). Duley's study was designed to identify what skills are needed for students to make the most of their experiential education curriculum. Through the identification of these skills it was shown that students would acquire new skills such as problem solving, analysis, developer, as well as improvement on skills they have already been introduced to such as lectures and interaction with fellow students.

Experiential learning programs have also been shown to benefit students in ways other than just enhanced academic performance. Experiential learning activities have been studied in terms of their relation to the development of responsibility and social decision making in students. "Experiential learning can provide students with a link between academic content and the self-confidence adulthood demands" (Crew).

Experiential learning through technology.

The introduction of educational media (software, hardware, virtual field trips, etc.) into the classroom as a part of experiential learning program has been shown to benefit students and teachers as well. "One type of program that allows students to interact electronically with experts and explorers around the world is adventure learning" (Snowman). Virtual field trips and software can be introduced in the classroom as part of the lecture or can be incorporated into a larger project in which the student must utilize time out of class in order to complete the project. With this technology students can see "first-hand" what it is they are studying, interact with other students from around the

world who are studying the same thing, and interact with experts in the field of history and educational practices.

Experiential learning through field trips.

Technology is not the only way the historical experience can be brought to life for students. In the metro-Richmond, Virginia area there are a countless number of sites including the Virginia Historical Society, Henricus Historical Park, Valentine Museum, Holocaust Museum, Museum of the Confederacy, Hollywood Cemetery, etc. that teachers can incorporate into an experiential learning curriculum. While most of these local sites highlight United States history, teachers can still find some resources dealing with world history. Sara Massey (1981) and John Duley (1978) have shown that when students see evidence or examples of topics through field trip experiences it enhances students' information recall and critical thinking skills. Constructivist theory would support this because, as stated in the theory, examples are what learners use to construct their understanding.

Method

Participants

One hundred and twenty high school social studies teachers were asked to voluntarily participate in this study. Ten teachers from each high school in Chesterfield County, Hanover County, and Essex County in Virginia were randomly selected. The school administration from each school district gave approval for submission of the surveys to these teachers. Two other metro-Richmond area school districts were asked to participate to provide a more broad research base of rural, urban, and suburban schools.

However, these two school districts either did not respond or never returned approval forms.

In addition, museum coordinators from selected historical sites throughout the Richmond area were interviewed during site visits and asked to complete a brief questionnaire. A total of six sites were visited.

Materials

An eleven-item survey was sent to teachers with an enclosed business reply envelope for their responses. The survey contained forced choice and ranking questions. Teachers were asked to identify the school where they taught, but no other personal information was requested. In addition, the survey was submitted to each participating school district along with a letter requesting permission to survey teachers in that district. Verbal or written approval was given by each of the participating school districts. Randolph-Macon College's Institutional Review Board approved this survey and study for use outside of the college community and for the use on human subjects.

The Teacher Survey was designed to determine teachers' use of experiential learning activities and resources, awareness of resources, and perception of the value of these resources. In addition, the survey asked what obstacles teachers confront when planning experiential learning activities.

The second six-item survey was given to administrators at six historical sites. Administrators had the option of responding orally to the survey or mailing their responses back in the provided business reply envelope. The questions on this survey focused on how those sites promote their SOL based programs to the school districts and

how they accommodate the needs of the teachers when working to establish programs that will be valuable to students.

Procedures

The Teacher Survey was distributed during three separate mass mailings during the end of May 2001 and the beginning of June 2001. It was requested that all surveys be returned in the provided business reply envelope by June 20th, 2001. The dates for survey distribution were chosen base on recommendations from school district administrators in the selected school systems. These administrators advised that teachers would be more likely to respond because much of their required school tasks would be completed since this was the end of the academic year.

Included in the survey packet sent to the participating social studies teachers was a cover letter describing the purpose of the study and a word of thanks for their participation. This cover letter also included a statement concerning the questions in the survey and their right to omit any question or not participate in the study at all. Also, all teachers were given the option to have the social studies coordinator from their district contact me and request an individual packet containing my findings.

The Teacher Survey was sent to three school districts in the Richmond metropolitan area. As previously mentioned two additional school districts were contacted, but no response was received. The participating school districts were chosen for reasons such as location, size, and socio-economic make-up. Of the one hundred and twenty surveys distributed, forty-nine surveys were returned (41% return rate).

Along with the one hundred and twenty high school teachers petitioned in this study, eight historical sites in the metro-Richmond area were petitioned for use in the

study. These sites were chosen for reasons such as proximity to the schools, relevance of subject matter presented, and standards-based (SOL) programs.

While at these sites the coordinator of educational media and programs was interviewed and or petitioned for and resources available to teachers, students, and school districts in terms of their media programs and events. All sites were cooperative and enthusiastic about participating in the study.

Finally, all software programs, video titles, and internet sites reviewed in this study were chosen on the basis of their relevance to the SOL's, recommendations from teachers (in their survey responses), recommendations from museum personnel, and researchers' assessment of their potential for success. A sample listing in included in Appendix A.

Results

Teacher Survey Responses. Descriptive statistics were used to determine if teachers incorporated experiential learning into their teaching. Based on the survey definition of experiential learning, teachers were asked if they incorporated field trips, Internet, software, or guest speakers in their teaching. The statistics showed that educational media had the highest level of use (mean=22.5). Descriptive statistics also showed that teachers used the Internet for instructional purposes (mean=22.25). It is interesting to note that Internet usage increased from 1998 to 2001 (see Figure 2). Teachers were less inclined to use guest speakers in their classrooms (mean=15.75). Teachers were least likely to take classes on field trips for educational purposes (mean=5). See Figure 1 for a comparison of these four experiential learning resources by teachers surveyed.

Descriptive statistics were also used to determine whether or not teachers thought there were enough experiential learning resources available to them either at historical sites, on the Internet, or through software programs. Of the forty-nine teachers responding, twenty-two (47.8%) thought there were enough resources and twenty-seven (42.2%) thought that there were not. When asked whether or not schools should place more emphasis on experiential learning, thirty-three (68%) teachers answered "yes;" one (.02%) answered "no"; and fourteen (29%) answered "same."

The Teacher Survey also gave teachers seven options to choose from when answering the question about what restrictions they felt were limiting their use of experiential learning resources. SOL demands ranked number one on the list (1.1 average among responding teachers); available funding and loss of direct class instruction time ranked number two, (3.3 average); block scheduling/scheduling ranked third, (3.7 average), planning time ranked fourth, (4 average); district restrictions ranked fifth, (5.5 average); and personal choice was ranked as the least restricting factor, (6.2 average).

Museum and Historical Sites. Similar methods were also used in determining the number and degree of relevance of experiential learning resources in the metro-Richmond area. Note, teachers and administrators alike advised that too much stress placed on field visits rather than Internet resources and software programs could be ill spent. Of the eight sites petitioned for participation in this study, five were contacted and surveyed. These historical sites were evaluated in three categories. The first was whether or not the landmark had a comprehensive Internet site teachers could access to gain information prior to a visit. In the first category, one hundred percent of sites qualified. The second was determining if there were SOL-based exhibits/educational

programs on display, available for display, or in the development process. Eighty percent of the sites qualified here, the only site not qualifying being the Hollywood Cemetery. The third and final category determined whether or not the site had resources available for teachers both in the museum and for teachers to use outside of the museum. One hundred percent of the evaluated sites qualified.

Discussion

The initial hypothesis was that low social studies SOL assessment scores may be related to limited use of experiential learning in classrooms. Responses from the Teacher Survey showed teachers were using few experiential learning resources. The most used resource was educational media with a yearly average of 22.5 of the 49 responding teachers (46%) using this in their classrooms. The resource that was used the least among responding teachers was field trips with only 10% of teachers using this resource annually (see Figure 1). It was also interesting to see the increase in utilization of the Internet between 1997-2001 (see Figure 2).

The returned surveys also indicated teachers were aware of the benefits of experiential learning resources, and teachers wanted schools to place more emphasis on the use of those resources in the classrooms for the benefit of their students. Of the forty-nine responding teachers, thirty-three (68%) believe schools should place more emphasis on the use of experiential learning resources in the classroom.

By examining the relationship between low test scores and the limited use of experiential learning, implementing more experiential learning in the classroom becomes a viable way to improve scores and overall student performance. There are,

however, many other hypothesized reasons for the low scores and proposed ways of raising those scores.

Though lack of experiential learning resources in the classroom was the focus in this study, there are other possible explanations for the lack of success on Social Studies SOL tests across Virginia. As discussed in Wermer's article from the March 22, 2001 Richmond Times Dispatch, the SOL's have been criticized for their lack of adequate coverage in certain "key" areas of history. Since the time of this article, there have been revisions made to the SOL's, which include reorganizing the topics covered and adding new topics.

Conclusion

The findings from the present study of teachers indicate interest and understanding of the value of experiential learning. While teachers' responses imply they feel stymied in efforts to use such learning resources, museums and technology are offering new ways to incorporate experiential learning. Software, Internet sites, and museum-created learning packets may help teachers overcome some obstacles so experiential learning can be a realistic component of social studies within a standards-based curriculum.

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Appendix A

Internet Site/Software Recommendations

1. http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amhome.html
2. http://www.7-12educators.about.com/education/7-12educators/cs/socialstudies/index.html
3. http:///www.vamuseums.org
4. http://www/mrdowling.com
5. http://www/execpc.com/~dboals/boals.html
6. http://www.ushistory.com
7. http://www.masshist.org/index.html
8. http://www.historymatters.gmu.edu
9. http://www.historychannel.com
10. http://www.thehistorynet.com
11. European Inspirer: The European Geography Scavenger Hunt for Your Entire Class?
12. American History Inspirer: The Civil War

Figure 1.

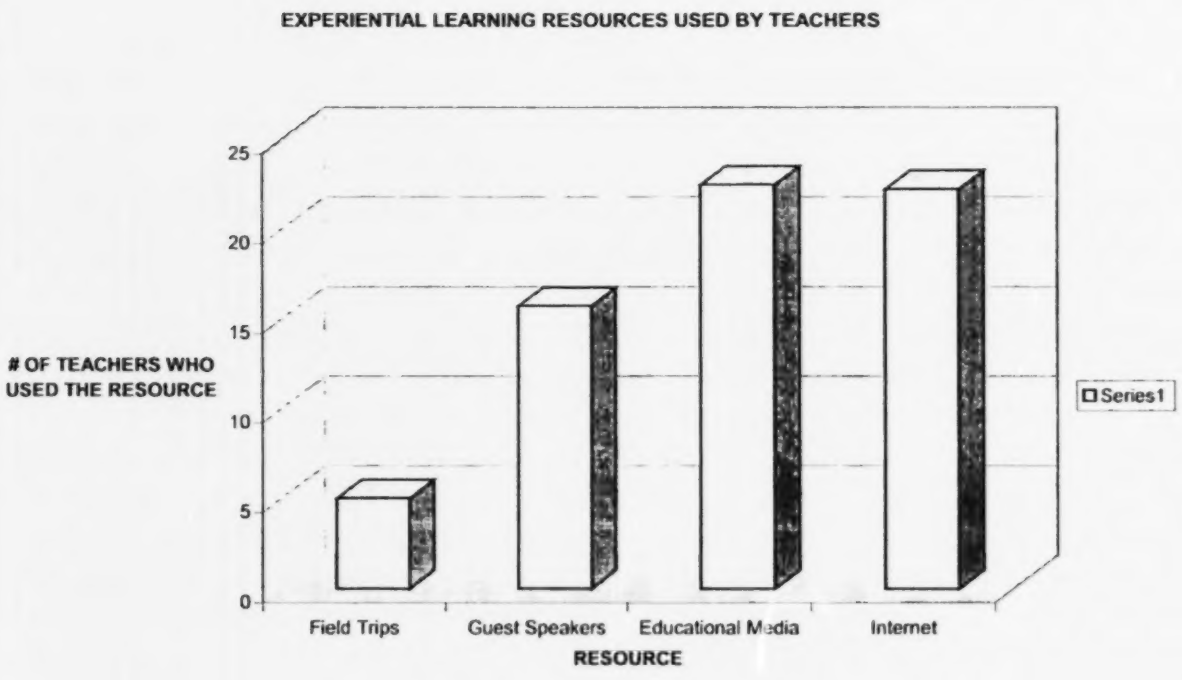
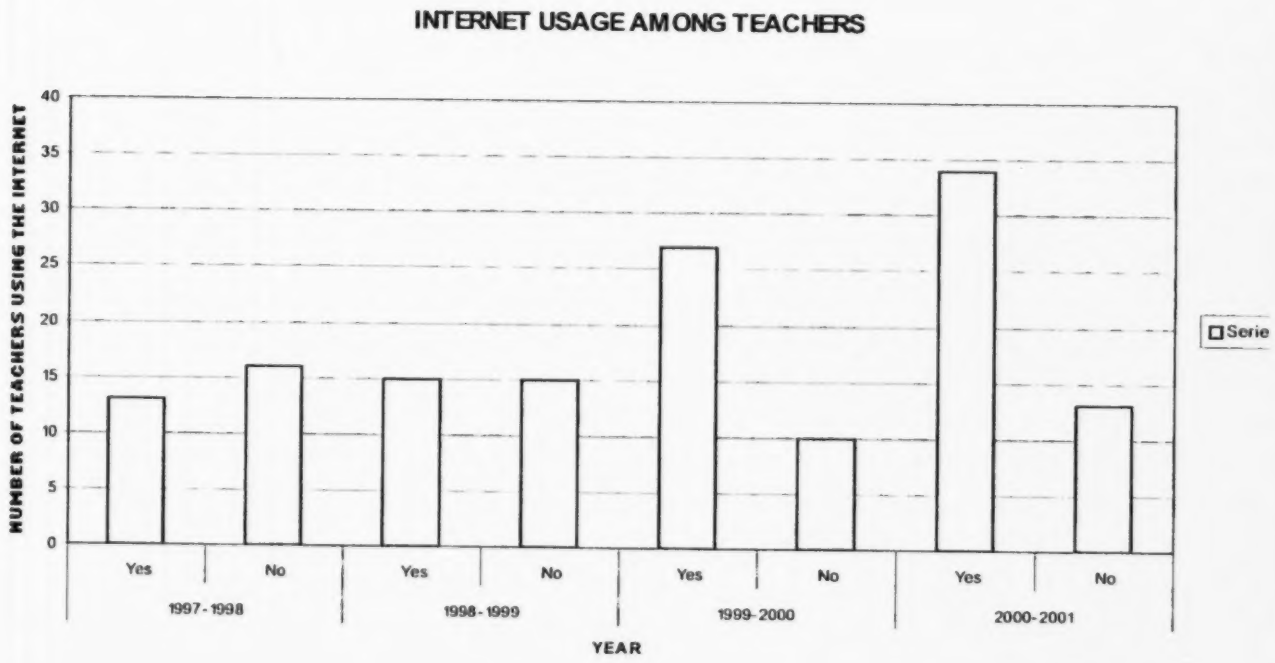

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING RESOURCES USED BY TEACHERS
OF TEACHERS WHO USED THE RESOURCE
25
20
15
10
5
0
Field Trips
Guest Speakers
Educational Media
Internet
RESOURCE
Series1

Figure 2.



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